New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1949

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"Mrs. Gibbons' Boys"

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NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
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"Mrs. Gibbons' Boys"

Daily Mirror

MAY 5, 1949

'Mrs. Gibbons' Boys' Fast But Weary at Music Box

By ROBERT COLEMAN

George Abbott is a master at staging fast-paced, wacky farces about scatter-brained people. He knows, better than most, that the secret is to keep the characters credible, no matter how zany their actions. So, it is easy to understand why he decided to produce "Mrs. Gibbons' Boys," but difficult to fathom why he failed to keep the participants in the new arrival at the Music Box Theatre believable.

Will Glickman and Joseph Stein have penned a script about an incredibly naive mother of three hoodlum sons, two in jail and one on probation. The two in jail, accompanied by an eccentric fellow inmate, escape stir in a garbage truck, and descend upon the Gibbons' flat just as a stodgy cashier for a gas company has proposed to mama.

The cashier wants out after the Gibbons boys and their pal take over the flat, loot his cash-box and prevent him from receiving a medal for 25 years of loyal service to the company. Though the cashier is disillusioned, Mrs. Gibbons is not. She still has faith in her baby bandit sons.

The only decent streak in the young hoodlums comes to the surface when they realize their mama is about to lose her chance for happiness with the cashier, and will probably go to jail for using judo on a detective in an effort to protect them. They agree to return to prison to square matters for mom.

"Mrs. Gibbons' Boys" is essentially a gag farce. And some of the gags are immensely funny. Authors Glickman and Stein know how to top an impossible situation with a slick laugh. But, producer-director Abbott has been unable to make you believe in, or sympathize with their motley array of gagsters.

Abbott, however, has not lost his knack for casting. Glenda Farrell, Lois Bolton, Tom Lewis, Richard Taber, William David, Francis Compton, Edward Andrews, Richard Carlyle, Ray Walston and Royal Dano are all wonderful types, and manage extraordinary effects with, on the whole, unprofitable roles.

Dano, making his second appearance on Broadway, does such a fine job as Ernie "Horse" Wagner, a lean, lanky, obtuse, muddled-thinking thug, as to win him an assignment in a better play.

Glickman and Stein have, perhaps, achieved their ultimate in characterization with the "Horse." It is too bad that the other characters are not as real and interesting as this thick-skulled, strong-armed cavalier.

"Mrs. Gibbons' Boys," in sum, might have been turned into a typical Abbott fun-fiesta. But it hasn't. It comes across the footlights merely as an amusing joke. Nevertheless, a single joke becomes wearying after a single act.

"MRS. GIBBONS' BOYS"

Comedy by Will Glickman and Joseph Stein; staged by George Abbott; setting by John Root; costumes by John Robert Lloyd; presented by Mr. Abbott at the Music Box Theatre, May 4, 1949. The cast:

Myra Ward.....Glenda Farrell
Mrs. Peggy Gibbons..Lois Bolton
Rudy Gibbons.....Tom Lewis
Mr. Rausch.....Richard Taber
Lester MacMichaels.....
Francis Compton
Woodrow Grupp.....
Edward Andrews
Francis X. Gibbons.....
Richard Carlyle
Rodia Gibbons.....Ray Walston
Ernie "Horse" Wagner....
Royal Dano
Coles.....William David
Pearl.....Helen Mayon

Synopsis: Act I. Living room of Mrs. Peggy Gibbons' home, 8:30 on a week-day evening. Act II. Same. The following morning. Act III. The same. Ten minutes later.

Journal American

MAY 5, 1949

Laughter Is Forced In Hollow 'Comedy'

By ROBERT GARLAND

It all depends on what you think is funny. Or on what you think is nothing to be laughed at. Only the other evening, Dalton Trumbo asked us to be mirthful in an undertaking parlor about a corpse that wasn't dead. Obligingly, we tried! Our laughter was as short-lived as the play.

Now, at the Music Box, Will Glickman and Joseph Stein ask of us the same favor in connection with a misguided mother and her cruel and criminal offspring. Again, we try to oblige. But, from last night's congregation, our mirth is forced and we are troubled at its hollowness.

Not that the cruelty and criminality of Mrs. Gibbons' progeny offend. Our postwar world has immunized us to the likes of those. On 45th St. or off, we take them as they come. As a matter of confession, we find the boys' non-Gibbons buddy, whose nickname happens to be Horse, endearing.

But I can't believe that we find them really funny. These Gibbons —a gibbon, says my dictionary, is "a long-armed anthropoid ape" —are just about as rightly laughable as the corpseless corpse of Mr. Trumbo's failure.

* * *

Boys Too Bad

The youngsters of the title—the self-styled "comedy" is called "Mrs. Gibbons' Boys"—are Rudy, named for a Mr. Vallee, Francis X., named for a Mr. Bushman, and Rodia, named for a Mr. Roque. They're natural-born criminals. And without the antidote of sportsmanship, intelligence or charm.

Like the Robber Browns of the "Bab Ballad," there never was so criminal a family as Mrs. Gibbons. Rudy is out on parole. Francis X. and Rodia are out on a jailbreak. And, in the living room of their mother's New York apartment, they behave in a manner befitting their chronic criminality.

It's a criminality they inherited from their father. For their mother, the misguided mammal of the title, is a good-hearted, good-natured dim-wit who can see, hear and do no evil in connection with her offspring. One of the play's king shortcomings is that you don't believe her.

Not even when her beloved stirbirds break up her romance with Mr. MacMichaels, hold him as hostage and rob his cashbox in an adjacent hideaway. She's too good, her boys too bad, to be true.

* * *

Glenda Wasted

In spite of Producer George Abbott's quick, slick direction, "Mrs. Gibbons' Boys" is a long time coming through. Once the mother and sons are brought into focus and their relationship established, there's little for them to do but repeat what they have done and redone already.

During three acts of this unholy mother-and-sons relationship, a well-chosen, hard-working cast does its best to prove that the play is actually a "comedy" and that the goings-on therein are to be laughed at. Lois Bolton, as Mrs. Gibbons, is nearest to succeeding.

Glenda Farrell is wasted on a role in which is neither rhyme nor reason. Francis Compton is also lost as the Mr. MacMichaels who will a-wooing go, even if it kills him. As the boys and Horse, their buddy, Tom Lewis, Richard Carlyle, Ray Walston and Royal Dano are too right to be bearable...

I read that "Mrs. Gibbons' Boys" is "well down Producer-Director Abbott's alley." It'll be happier there, I think, than at the Music Box on 45th St. And there he can keep it, if he's in need of my permission.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

MAY 5, 1949

= By HOWARD BARNES =

Poor Mother Gibbons

SEVERAL engaging performers are trapped in "Mrs. Gibbons' Boys," a dismal dissertation on mother love which has opened at the Music Box Theater. Although the generally astute George Abbott has propelled them through the motions of a comedy, they rarely succeed in inspiring a chuckle. The Will Glickman-Joseph Stein play is one that should have died aborning. Neither the lines nor the situations deserve the ministrations of Lois Bolton, Glenda Farrell, Francis Compton and their colleagues. Compton is the most fortunate of the principals. He is forever making exits.

* * *

The central farcical notion of the work is that a doting and daft mother believes her three sons are sterling characters, although two of them are in jail and the third is on parole. When the widow has a fussy gas company employee propose marriage, the stage is set for a series of complications. It is doubtful if they would have proved particularly funny in any case. As they transpire in "Mrs. Gibbons' Boys," they are tasteless and devastatingly dull. Before the production runs its course the jailbirds escape, corner the gasman and loot him, beat up a crooked politician and commit sundry acts of violence. That they dutifully go back to prison so that their mother can get married is merely a sorry climax to a woefully inept drama.

* * *

Miss Bolton has the unlucky task of playing Mrs. Gibbons. She tries her best to get lift out of dialogue which has all the buoyancy of field rocks, but she rarely succeeds. As her aging suitor, Compton is properly horrified by his potential stepson, but the hilarity of his predicament is scarcely sustained. He has one or two moments of amusing byplay with the villains. Even his sharp caricature does little to relieve the tedium of the offering. As for Miss Farrell, she is almost completely lost in the shuffle.

* * *

There is a good portrayal of a dumb thug by Royal Dano, which is worthy of notice, even if his material is not. Richard Carlyle, Ray Walston and Tom Lewis are the boys of the title and they merely struggle with clumsy bits of business. That is all any of the players in "Mrs. Gibbons' Boys" can do. Abbott's direction, incidentally, does little to help the cast. This is not a production of which he should be proud.

DAILY NEWS

MAY 5, 1949

"Mrs. Gibbons' Boys" Tries Hard To Be Funny and Strains Itself

By JOHN CHAPMAN

There is enough daffy humor in "Mrs. Gibbons' Boys," which was presented last evening at the Music Box, to tempt an unwary producer into offering it. But the play is not worth the sponsorship and directorial ministrations of George Abbott, who has given us so many grand farces.

Will Glickman and Joseph Stein have written a piece about a mother who loves her three sons even though they are thugs. One of the boys is on parole and the other two have just crashed out of a penitentiary, and their mother adores them. She loyally attends all their trials, and she won't let the boy who is on parole speak to the brothers who have escaped, because anybody who has been paroled must not associate with habitual criminals.

This is a nice, nutty notion, but the authors and Mr. Abbott have been unable to do much with it. Lines which should be outrageously funny drop dead as soon as they are uttered because the story is thin and tiresome. Once Mrs. Gibbons' boys have come home, which is in the first act, there is nothing to do with them except keep them around until the end of the third act and then send them back to confinement.

Mr. Abbott has found and brought up more good comedians than any other manager, and his discovery for last evening is Royal Dano, a lanky young man whose only other Broadway appearance went unnoticed. Mr. Dano grimly portrays the character of one Horse Wagner, a convict who has busted out with two of Mrs. Gibbons' three boys, and he does it so very, very well that I hope other and better roles will soon be given him.

An Abbott company always is a good one, even when the play misses. Glenda Farrell has a tough and amusing moment now and then, Lois Bolton is a properly vapid Mother Gibbons and the others are as helpful and amiable as possible. I wish they all could have a better script to fool around with.

New York World-Telegram

MAY 5, 1949

Mother Defends Sons' Crimes in New Play

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Despite certain hilarity at the beginning and the end of "Mrs. Gibbons' Boys," there is a long low sag in the middle, and the humor is that of misunderstanding, nonsequiturs and insanity.

It is also an excellent argument for sterilization, for Mrs. Gibbons is an idiotic and dangerous person, no matter how sweetly fay she may appear on the surface. The single attitude, i.e. joke, of the evening is her witless defense and shielding of three sons who are habitual criminals.

This might have been an idea for a keen witted satire on parenthood in general, but it stands as a repetitious kneading of a questionable gag.

Mrs. Gibbons is about to snare a second husband in the person of a meek clerk of a gas company, when her family begins arriving home unannounced. The youngest is chased in by a grocer he has robbed of a crate of pineapple juice. The older two wind up a jail break at home, bringing with them one "Horse" who is the most engaging person in the play.

Mother Uses Judo.

The rest of the evening is devoted to the older boys' efforts to get enough money to skip town. The climax comes when the fluttery Mrs. Gibbons uses judo to incapacitate a police officer.

She consistently insists that the boys are misunderstood, though their records are massive, until her defense of them ceases to be sympathetic blindness and becomes a travesty on maternal affection.

This is the sort of character which can be funny on the stage in small startling doses, but definitely not as the nucleus of an entire evening.

Nothing Lois Bolton can do makes her otherwise. Miss Bolton has a way with a line and a smile, and reads with intelligent comic timing. It is not her fault that the character she plays is an irritatingly stupid woman who surely deserves the jail sentence she finally threatens to take if her sons will not surrender.

This delayed gesture toward law and order points up her scatterbrained tendencies without adding to her charm.

Glenda Farrell Clicks.

Glenda Farrell plays one of those wise gals who is blunt, capable and bored with her family. It is the sort of part Miss Farrell could do blindfolded, as she lands her too few lines like an expert dart thrower and makes them funnier than they started out to be.

Francis Compton is engaging if stunned as Mrs. Gibbons' suitor, wrenching comedy out of an entirely negative role.

The real life of the party is Royal Dano as "Horse," who is gallant toward decent dames and enjoys tossing people he does not approve of through plate glass windows. He has never heard of law except from behind bars, and cops are his mortal enemies.

Dano plays this hoodlum with blunt good will, and a wisely obstinate refusal to think he is funny, making him the most memorable character of the evening.

Edward Andrews is convincing as a blustering phoney, and William David is a most patient officer of the law.